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ABSTRACT

What has been depicted as persistent, widespread failure of Latino adolescents in schools can be viewed as resistance to the hegemonic pressures of schools, precipitated in part by schools' failure to value and understand their age- and culturally-specific literacies. This paper examines graffiti, one such literacy, as a public literacy practice. Seven samples of Los Angeles area "Cholo" style graffiti are analyzed for their content, nature, and function according to a semiotic model developed in Mexico, in the context of sociohistorical development in East Los Angeles. Results reveal that, contrary to the official school perspective, Chicano adolescents engage in purposeful literate practices that express commonly held values, using culturally recognized forms. These forms are stable across time, but respond in flexible and creative ways when practiced by different users in different contexts. A consideration of the messages that are expressed in Chicano gang graffiti displays evidence of important critiques regarding discourse practices and uses of public space. Implications for educators include understanding the knowledge that students demonstrate as part of these literacies, democratizing the contexts in which students are asked to acquire valued literacy practices, and developing social networks between schools, families, and communities. (Contains 55 references.) (Author/SM)

CHICANO STREET SIGNS: GRAFFITI AS PUBLIC LITERACY PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

What has been depicted as persistent and widespread failure of Latino adolescents in schools can be viewed as resistance to the hegemonic pressures of schools, precipitated in part by the failure of schools to value and understand their age- and culturally-specific literacies. This paper examines graffiti, one of the many examples of these literacies, as a public literacy practice. Seven samples of Los Angeles area "Cholo" style graffiti are analyzed for their content, nature and function according to a semiotic model developed in Mexico, in the context of socio-historical development in East Los Angeles.

This analysis reveals that, contrary to the official school perspective, these Chicano adolescents engage in purposeful literate practices that express commonly held values, using culturally recognized forms. These forms tend to be stable across time, but respond in flexible and creative ways when practiced by different users in different contexts. Further, a consideration of the messages that are expressed in Chicano gang graffiti displays evidence of important critiques regarding discourse practices and uses of public space. Implications for educators include understanding the knowledge that students demonstrate as part of these literacies, democratizing the contexts in which students are asked to acquire valued literacy practices, and the development of social networks between schools, families, and communities.

The persistent and widespread school failure of Latino youth, at the same time that their numbers in the public schools are rapidly increasing (Sanchez, 1999), is well documented (August & Hakuta, 1997). This gap between Latino school performance and expectations for achievement typically begins early and widens throughout schooling (Haycock & Navarro, 1988), but is enacted dramatically during adolescence when large numbers of Latino youth drop out of school (MacArthur, 1993).

A significant body of literature exists which attempts to explain the refusal, failure, or resistance of language-minority youth to acquire and demonstrate the literacy required for school purposes in school contexts. Many such studies focus on ways in which the public school embodies and reproduces dominant cultural forms (Cummins, 1989; Labov, 1970; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986), thereby delimiting possible definitions of literacy, and devaluing and misunderstanding the literacies of students from non-mainstream cultures. While other investigations have examined the ways that members of non-mainstream cultures employ literacies in their own social contexts for their own purposes (Au & Mason, 1981; Moll, 1992), few have focused on Latino adolescents. Subsequently, this paper examines the nature, content and function of Chicano gang graffiti as one public literacy practice of Latino adolescents.

Theoretical Perspective

Asymmetrical Literacies

Literacy is "a social construction of reality embedded in collective practice in specific social situations" (Street, 1984, p. 12), that is, literate practices serve specific

functions for specific social purposes. Street contrasts this definition with the notion of literacy as a single, homogenous thing that can exist as a complete entity outside of any context, which he describes as the "autonomous model" (p. 8). He asserts that this autonomous model of literacy, which is the literacy taught in schools, serves a hegemonic function in compulsory schooling by devaluing literacies from non-mainstream contexts and privileging literate conventions that are defined by the social contexts of dominant culture institutions. As a consequence, non-mainstream forms of literacy, such as graffiti, may be rendered impotent and meaningless, even criminalized, within the institution of the school, as well as in the larger society.

Freire and Macedo (1987) claim that in order for emancipatory literacy to proceed, students must "become literate about their own histories, experiences, and the culture of their immediate environments... [but] they must also appropriate those codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so they can transcend their own environments" (p. 47). Students should become proficient in dominant culture literacies so that they can be heard as legitimate voices in institutions of power. They should also learn about themselves and their own communities in order to construct meaningful identities and valued affiliations with others of their and different communities.

As Giroux (1987) notes, however, "literacy neither automatically reveals nor guarantees social, political, and economic freedom" (p. 11). A third necessary component is what Freire called "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1973), or the development and employment of a discursive metalanguage to analyze both standard and nonstandard literacies, and the ways they reflect and resist dominant culture meanings. The New London Group (1996) makes a similar argument, asserting that teachers and

students need a "tool kit for working on semiotic activities" (p. 9) that could help them to "identify and explain differences between texts, and relate these to the contexts of the culture and situation in which they seem to work" (p. 9). In this way, students learn to take an analytical step back in order to see the object of their study within its context so that they can critique it. The New London Group predicts that those who are able to navigate and critically analyze multiple discourses will be able to enact a literacy (and literacies) that is much more valued than those who have control merely over Standard English literacy (1996).

Giroux argues that the refusal of a group to become school-literate, especially where that group engages in its own literate practices outside the school, may in fact constitute an "act of resistance" against the hegemonic pressures of school (1987). In an empirical study, Shuman (1986) notes that the adolescents in the junior high school she studied almost never wrote for their own purposes, though they were capable of written production to fulfill class assignments. The only exception she found was when adolescents collaboratively used writing as a form of protest, which was rare. Gundaker (1998) examines how the choice patterns related to literacy, or, the patterns of both reading and "not reading", writing and "not writing", that members of non-mainstream cultures create offer important clues to societal power, how it is wielded and by whom. This refusal to become school-literate, then, marks a site for investigation of the conditions and pressures that lead this political act.

However, since the act is in some ways invisible, as in the failure to complete required work, or as in drop-out or chronic truancy, or as in the unwillingness or inability to perform required work to an expected standard, it is difficult to pursue an investigation

of the nature of this resistance within the context of schools. Such an investigation is better informed by the analysis of practices outside of the school context, in students' communities.

Literacy Learning

Moll (1992) has suggested that Latino communities, like others, possess "ample language, cultural, and intellectual resources" which the schools typically fail to access. These "funds of knowledge" include shared symbols, both visual and linguistic, that serve important functions for community members. Competent members of these communities can tap this iconography for specific purposes in specific social contexts, or in Goodman's words (1994), "cultures evolve text forms that become conventionalized and predictable by those who share the culture" (p. 1111). These "social literacies" (Street, 1995) are part of that community's discourse practices.

In educational research, discourse is a contested term with multiple meanings, depending upon the author. I use it here in the sense that Gee explicates Discourse (capitalized), as "identity kits" (1996) which are acquired through apprenticeship into practice in a particular community. He defines Discourses as

> Ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. A Discourse is a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. (p. 127)

Apprentices "take on perspectives, adopt a world view, accept a set of core values, and master an identity" (p. 136) through immersion in group practices. Stated another way, people acquire the Discourse that is available to them by virtue of their activity in the context of a particular time and place, and of the relationships that connect them socially.

School-based literacy is also acquired in this way. However, as Gutierrez notes (1995), not all students have access to the acquisition of academically valued literacy practices, which grants membership into an academic community. Some students, she asserts, acquire instead "some forms of linguistic knowledge and behaviors needed to display right answers" (p. 22). Those linguistically and culturally diverse students are targeted for remediation because they do not display "nonminority students' ways of knowing and learning" (p. 22). Based on her own ethnographic study (Gutierrez, 1987), she found that her focal students' experience in remedial programs, as opposed to traditional classrooms, had led them to appropriate "skills that rendered them dysfunctional in traditional and more academic classroom activities" (p. 31). Urban youth of color often do not have access to apprenticeship into literacy practices that are valued in the larger society.

Literacy Defined

In recognizing both the context-bound nature of diverse social literacies, and the important influence of changing technologies on those practices, the New London Group (1996) coined the term "multiliteracies" to describe modes of representation that combine languages, symbols, and signs, and promotes that term as more useful than the term "literacy." Broader definitions of literacy such as this allow for the incorporation of a wider range of signification activities under one rubric. Gundaker (1998), explicating differences between "conventional" or schooled literacy and "vernacular" or social literacies, states

> The main divergence between these groups...arises not from signs themselves, but because conventional literate ideology devalues or brackets from relevance virtually all aspects of reading or writing that are context-dependent or not directly involved in the decoding of units of sound. In other words, this ideology

> functionally isolates components associated with literacy from those of other potentially communicative repertoires. (p. 9)

Further, artifacts of literate practices are characteristically a 'mix' of oral and written discourse (Street, 1984). Any attempt to separate these discourse modes "does not do justice to the variety and complexity of literate practices (and) undervalues the character of oral practices" (p. 42). "Real world" artifacts of literate practice can be expected to evidence an amalgamation of both visual and linguistic symbology.

These literate artifacts are also traces of purposeful human endeavor in a particular place and a particular time. Freire and Macedo (1987) use the metaphor of reading to describe the ways that human perceive, interpret and interact with the world; "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world" (p. 35). We direct our attention to certain points, make connections to specific memories, form our own understandings, then use our meanings to act and reflect upon our actions. It is Freire's contention that all humans have the capacity to engage in this process regardless of their literacy practice (Freire, 1970). Schiller describes how urban youth "read" their world, the built environment, and quotes Barber;

> They [the kids] are society-smart rather than school smart. They are adept readers—but not of books. What they read so acutely are the social signals that emanate from the world in which the will have to make a living. Their teachers in this world—the nation's true pedagogues—are television, advertising, movies, politics and the celebrity domains they define. (p. 107)

Literacies are purposeful forms of signification that may be used for reflective ends.

For the purposes of this paper I am using a broad definition of literacy. I understand literacies as crucially shaped by the resources, traditions and needs of the communities who practice them. I view competent practitioners of literacies as having

been apprenticed into a community of practice, and as purposeful scribes. Literate artifacts may include inscriptions of signs, symbols and texts from multiple languages and other sign systems. Literacies are bounded by communities of practice to the degree that a community shares common understandings of their practices.

Ironically, while there is considerable documentation of the lack of literacy among Latino youth, we in Los Angeles are surrounded by artifacts of the public literate practices of this same population. Some of these artifacts include: Chicano murals; neighborhood and gang graffiti; tattoo designs; designs painted by car club members on their vehicles, and documented in such publications as Street Customs, Lowrider and Street Low; cholo art as published in magazines, such as Lowrider Arte, Teen Angels, and Varrio Arte; designs drawn by students on notebooks, backpacks, and letters; and radio dedications on "oldies" stations such as KRTH 101, Mega 100, and Arrow 106. Many of these artifacts also exist as hypermedia on various websites.

Chicano Gang Graffiti

Chicano Gang Culture

Chaz Bojorquez, a well-known Los Angeles graffiti artist, created street graffiti throughout the Seventies and into the Eighties, then moved inside to work in the studio. He writes, "...If the city was a body, graffiti would tell us where it hurt" (Bojorquez, 1997). Today, as then, members of youth gangs create much of the graffiti in public urban areas.

Youth gangs, like the neighborhoods in which they are found, tend to be racially segregated and economically depressed. East Los Angeles is a historically Mexican-

American, or Chicano[1] neighborhood, and South Central historically African-American. Both communities have received a large influx of immigrants in recent years from other Latin American countries as well. It has been estimated that actual youth gang members comprise a relatively small proportion, from four to ten percent, of the populations of these neighborhoods (Vigil, 1999). However, the public literacy practices of these youth represent the most visible organized dissent in these neighborhoods, and so are worthy of attention.

Although Chicano youth gangs are considered by many in law enforcement to be crimogenic, or cause youths to commit crimes, Moore and Vigil (1989) describe these gangs instead as "tropho-criminal," or tolerant of, even encouraging, individual deviance. However, they found that the gang activities were quite separate from individual criminal activities, and that the group functioned mainly as part of "normal adolescent concerns: peer respect and approval, security and protection, group support and acceptance, and age and sex role identification" (p. 28). In fact, interviews with former gang members revealed that two-thirds held jobs and most had their own families after growing to adulthood.

Members (and affiliated non-members) announce their gang membership (or familiarity and acceptance) through the performance of a complex discourse involving distinctive kinesics, proxemics and dress, or "body discourses" (Moje, 1998, October), as well as music, language and literacy. Body movements are complex, but generally conform to a posture that conveys self-control through the use of stylized and parsimonious gestures and movements, "generally methodical, deliberate, and smooth" (Vigil, 1990, p. 117). Male clothing styles tend to reflect the influence of "public

sources—military and penal" (p. 110) as well as concerns for comfort, durability and low price. Males' haircuts also reflect prison influence, typically cut very short and sometimes combed straight back. A very clean and neat aesthetic results in a conservative appearance, reminiscent of the 1950s.

Traditionally, music choices among cholo youth derived from an "oldies" (usually constituted of black rhythm and blues) orientation, however recently hip hop and rap styles are becoming more evident. Speech practices today among cholo youth continue to reflect a mix of both English and Spanish, as well as invented patois (sometimes called Spanglish) vocabulary, but English is the dominant language in contrast to fifty years ago, when Spanish was dominant. Spanish words that survive in common use are most often those that relate to group membership and serve to strengthen social ties (Vigil, 1990).

Moore and Vigil (1989) note that gang members use the word barrio to denote both their neighborhood and their gang. This connection can "create altruistic feelings among members, prompting one young woman to characterize her gang activities in terms of community service: 'We do good things like car-washes, socials and fundraisers'" (p. 29). The emic view of cholos[2], or gang members, suggests that they see the gang as a "strong and supportive organization which offers positive sanctions for participation" (p. 29).

Rather than defining gangs as deviant subcultures, Moore and Vigil (1989) prefer to describe them as oppositional subcultures. The gangs offer a substitute for an unsatisfactory value system imposed upon them by white, mainstream institutions. "The Chicano gangs thus represent an institutionalized rejection of the values of adult

authority—especially as exhibited in the Anglo-dominated schools and police departments" (p. 31). It is important to note also that not all of the youth involved with gangs are full-fledged members. Non-gang youth may have some of these same needs met without living the gang life or *vida loca.*

Although Romo and Falbo (1996) found no correlation between having gang-involved friends and high school dropout, there is evidence to suggest that disinterest in school and school failure encourage skipping school and interest in gangs (p. 88). Romo and Falbo describe the schools attended by the children in their study as "porous buildings, with little or nothing holding students inside" (p. 86). They tell how secondary students who struggle in school are tracked into remedial classes that give them access to gang members while failing to offer social opportunities that compete with those of the gang. The school submits adolescents who do not succeed well at school-defined activities to a course of action that can amount to pushing them out of school (Vigil, 1999). These youth often affiliate with gangs and gang culture. In Los Angeles, Chicano gang culture is centered in East Los Angeles, but its influence spreads to barrios throughout the county.

Public Space in East Los Angeles, an Historical Perspective

While some Latino graffiti in Los Angeles has been traced back to the 1930s, one of the most important influences on what has become "Old School Cholo" culture is the 1940s period of the Zootsuiters. So-called because of the oversized, tailor-made "drapes" or suits they wore, the Zootsuiters defined themselves as different from Anglos through their pompadour hairstyles, their music, and their language. They spoke a slang of half-English, half-Spanish called "Caló."

Anglos saw this rebellious youth culture as dangerous, but it evolved in part because of the rejection of Mexican-Americans by Anglos (Ríos-Bustamante & Castillo, 1986). A nativist movement of this period was enacted through mass deportations of Mexicans, the "Zootsuit Riots" in which Mexican-American youth were beaten by U.S. servicemen on the streets of downtown Los Angeles while law enforcement looked on, and the arrest and prosecution of several Mexican-American youth on trumped up charges of murder in the "Sleepy Lagoon Trial" (Jimenéz, 1994).

Aspects of Zootsuit culture evolved through time and were further influenced in the 1960s by el movimiento, the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. El movimiento inspired a renaissance of mural painting in barrios throughout California (Cockcroft & Barnet-Sánchez, 1990). This practice was rooted in the muralismo of post-revolutionary México in which public spaces were exploited as a forum to express resistance against unjust power structures. Murals in East Los Angeles served to rally the community's support of the civil rights movement, but also played an influential role in the development of the Chicano identity. Chicano history, neglected in school textbooks, was depicted in the murals.

In the public schools of East Los Angeles, there is a tradition of organized student protest, dating back to at least the late 1960s. In March of 1968, students in six barrio high schools walked out, in numbers that would eventually total over 10,000, to protest school district policies and practices that they believed to be racist and responsible for mediocre educational opportunities available in those schools (Martinez, 1999). The "blow-outs," as they came to be known, were a strategy that was employed again and again. Students organized local strikes to protest against Proposition 187 in 1994, which

would have restricted immigrant access to public services including schools, and in 1999 to call attention to excessive police searches and use of substitutes at Fremont High School (Smith, 1999), and to protest poor conditions at Belmont High School (Sauerwein, 1999).

The history of Latinos in Los Angeles can be characterized in part as a dynamic between official and unofficial racism on the part of white Angelenos, and organized and unorganized political protest by Eastside community members in response. The graffiti of Chicano youth gangs developed and became conventionalized within this cultural and historical context.

Recently, urban planners and architecture historians, like Gonzalez (1999), have begun to analyze the uses of public space in East Los Angeles as "experimental urbanity" (p. 186). He describes how a unique form of "latinidad" emerges from roots in both colonial and Latin American aesthetics, drawn together by immigrants in a new land. Crawford (1999) describes how East L. A. homeowners often express this new hybrid aesthetic "through personal and cultural alterations to their houses" (p. 117) that seem to increase the personal pleasure that homeowners derive from their dwellings. These transformations serve to decommodify the houses and "remove them from the context of mass-market values," thereby offering an "alternative to the middle-class American house" (p. 117).

Both she and Rojas (1999) describe other alternate uses of both domestic and personal space in East L. A. They note that the front yard functions differently on the Eastside than for middle-class homes, serving as a plaza or gathering place instead of the traditional "no-man's land." Fences, rather than separating people, become "dynamic

places where people come together" (p. 136). Wall spaces are a site for personal and cultural expression for "cholos, political groups, and shop owners" (p. 135). Rojas adds that the murals and graphics that cover the walls not only liven up the area, but the aesthetics they create are "more important than the building, thus becoming the architecture" (p. 136). All of these scholars highlight the notion that uses of public space, where Chicano gang graffiti is inscribed, cannot be easily interpreted through middle-class American values regarding how a neighborhood should be seen and used.

Graffiti Forms

Graffiti are inscriptions or drawings written on walls, sidewalks, and the like. Graffiti in Los Angeles largely belong to one of two types, New York Wild Style or Los Angeles Cholo Style. Wild Style, evident in Los Angeles since the 1970s, is a colorful, fanciful style associated with Hip-Hop (see Figure 1). The focus in Wild Style is for crews of taggers to "get up," or write their tag names, in as many places as possible, as large as possible. By contrast, Cholo Style writings focus on the placement of placas, or symbols of territorial street boundaries, and are "pledges of allegiance to your neighborhood" [Bojorquez[3], 1997 #22]. Typically, one or two writers write for the entire gang and limit their inscriptions to public spaces within their own territory, their barrio (see Figure 2). This paper focuses on Cholo Style graffiti and its connection to specific neighborhoods and gangs.

INSERT FIGURES 1 & 2 ABOUT HERE

The classic Cholo Style placa is written in upper case letters in what is called Old English. Bojorquez (1997) explains that "this squarish, prestigious typeface was meant to present to the public a formal document, encouraging gang strength, and creating an aura

of exclusivity" (p. 1). The typeface has evolved over the years, partly because of the nature of the spray paint, medium of choice since the 1950s, used to create it. Letters have been transformed so that they can be written in one stroke while continuously pressing the button on the can. The placa includes the street name, a roll call list of each member's gang name, and the name(s) of the person or people who wrote it. The traditional aesthetic demands that placas be written with care to make them straight and clean. The words should be stacked on top of each other, or flush to one side. According to Bojorquez, "this tradition...rarely deviates drastically and is handed down from generation to generation" (p. 10).

In this paper, I examine samples of the traditional placa as well as variations of it. I will limit my analysis and discussion to a selection of seven examples of graffiti, four from East Los Angeles, and three from South Central Los Angeles.

Methodology

Data Sources

I have selected data sources based on the following criteria; 1) they are artifacts that are intended for a public audience, 2) they are created by Chicano youth, and 3) the images or text-types either occur with high frequency, or represent functional variations. For this examination, I am using photographs of gang graffiti from a Los Angeles-based Chicano website. I downloaded all of these images from Sleepy Lagoon[4], a pseudonymously maintained site that includes an archive of Chicano gang placas[5]. The images are also posted anonymously, presumably to protect those who submit them from legal consequences, so it is impossible to know the logic for selection for posting.

However there appears to be a fairly representative sample from most of the neighborhoods portrayed. It is likely that many of the images are created and posted by the writers themselves. The archive offers a way to preserve many graffiti that may be quickly painted over after they are completed.

I examined the images of over one hundred examples of Cholo Style graffiti, from eight different Los Angeles barrios in order to select seven for analysis (the archive includes many more images from more than forty barrios). I selected three samples that represent high frequency forms. These include a classic placa with roll call from White Fence, a placa without roll call, and a mascot placa from Indiana Street. The fourth sample is a memorial from Indiana Street. I also selected a set of three images from 36th Street in South Central Los Angeles. This set mostly conforms to the traditional placa, but varies in some ways. I later suggest possible reasons for these variations.

Analytical Scheme

I performed a content analysis on the selected examples based on the analytical model put forth by Cruz Reguillo (1991). This model was developed for use in an ethnographic study of several literate artifacts, including graffiti, produced by gangs in the area of Guadalajara, Mexico. She asserts that by examining the products of communication, the material and social conditions of the production and recognition of communication, the media, spaces, rules and breadth of circulation of communication, we can come to some understanding of the identity and social uses of the communication for the participants.

Cruz Reguillo proposes a two-part analytical model. The first part aims at a semiotic analysis. The text is treated as a cultural and historical object that is defined by

the relations between the meanings assigned to the text by the sender and the receiver of the object. This part of the analysis is aimed at decoding the content of the message.

The second part of Cruz Reguillo's model constitutes an analysis of enunciation, which includes the relationship between the "enunciator" and her or his enunciation, according to three indices; 1) the person, where I is the sender and you the receiver, 2) the time, and 3) the space. For the purposes of analysis, "you" is understood to be another insider, a member of the gang. In the discussion, I consider potential different meanings for different "receivers," or members of different publics. Since this is a textual analysis, the analyst does not speculate on the three indices above, but rather looks for written markers of these indices in the physical text.

These two parts, the semiotic and the enunciatory, are combined into one model (p. 71) that aims to identify the most plausible intended meaning. It does not exclude the possibility of other meanings related to personal preferences and choices, or temporal or spatial constraints. Rather, this model attempts to name the meaning closest to the text (Cruz Reguillo, 1991).

By applying the above selection criteria and analytical method on the data sources listed, I locate and explicate some of the meanings and functions of graffiti as public literate practice for Latino youth in the Los Angeles area. Note that although the graffiti are created as whole works, and should be understood in that way, I have divided each into separate elements, labeled in lower case letters, for analysis. Content analysis follows the model in Cruz Reguillo (1991). The results of the analyses are summarized in the next section.

Findings

East Los Angeles

PLACE FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Figure 3 shows a typical "roll call" placa from the White Fence gang. It is spray-painted in a single dark color that contrasts with the white wall of a corner store. Its dimensions are approximately ten feet long by four feet high. This location is an especially important one because it is on corners such as these that street vendors congregate (Rojas, 1999), thus ensuring a wide audience.

Element "a" lists the nicknames of the active members of the gang, with diamond shapes acting as spacers between names. Nicknames confer anonymity and signal group membership. Cruz Reguillo (1991) describes these names as codes which, when conferred, symbolize baptism into the "family." They may derive from personal appearances (such as "Fuzzy") or personal quirks (such as "Lefty") (Vigil, 1990), but also may reflect pop cultural influences (such as names from songs or cartoons). The effect of element "a" is to assert belonging to the group.

Two names are included, but set apart to the right of the roll call. They are slightly smaller and include the Spanish masculine article "el." According to convention, this element identifies "El Yogies" and "El Manboy" as the writers of this placa. This element gains credit for the two writers, thereby increasing their intra-group prestige, and demonstrates their loyalty to the group.

Element "c" displays the initials of the White Fence gang and the purported year of its origin. White Fence is widely believed the oldest extant East Los Angeles cholo gang. Including the year of origin serves to assert the gang's primacy. The related element "d"

connects this idea to being first. Originality and supremacy can be conflated under this sign.

The central element of this placa, both by size and placement, is the message "White Fence Rifa," which translates to "White Fence Rules." This element serves two purposes; to identify the gang and its members, and to assert the power of the gang. While this element is central, it is important to view the placa as a whole. The message then reads something like: "We are the powerful group here. Here are our loyal members. Our power derives from our connections to each other, and through time, and to this place."

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4, an Indiana Street gang placa, includes three elements. Element "a," "varrio," conforms to the common gang orthography of the Spanish "barrio" (in Mexican Spanish, the "v" and "b" sounds are identical). As noted earlier, barrio is used to denote both the neighborhood and the gang, so this element serves to assert both territory and group identity. Element "b" declares the name of the barrio, Indiana Street. It is carefully formed in outline Old English, the preferred cholo typeface.

Element "c," the numbers "1" and "3" formed in the dots of the "i"s, together make the number thirteen, a common element in cholo placas. The denotation of this element varies. It is generally agreed to stand for the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, "m." The letter may stand for "Mexico," for the Mexican "Mafia," or alternatively for "marijuana," signifying that this gang sells and/or uses the drug (Salt Lake Area Gang Project, 2000). Thus, the number thirteen may assert a connection to the home country, a connection to a larger criminal organization, or an affiliation with illegal drug use and, by flaunting authority, rebelliousness. Indeed, it may assert any or all of these messages.

Taken together, these elements, and their placement on a raised wall easily visible from the street, form a placa that asserts the gang's identity with power and importance. It may also signal connections to larger cultural or counter-cultural groups and values.

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Figure 5 shows an example of a cholo memorial graffito. The central element "a" identifies the barrio Indiana Street. Element "b" presents the initials of Los Angeles, the larger city, in the style of the Dodgers baseball team logo. The logo is smaller than the initials of the barrio and is placed between them, thereby claiming membership in the larger community, but not at the expense of neighborhood loyalty. Element "c" is an alternate form (the "X" is read as the Roman numeral ten) for the number thirteen discussed in the last example. Element "d" identifies the subject of the memorial as "Flako" (an anglicization of the Spanish "Flaco," meaning "skinny"), followed by "R I P" for "rest in peace." This element acts to remember and honor a fallen "homeboy."

It is interesting to note the content and placement of this graffito. It is carefully painted in silver paint on a dark background. The surface on which elements "a," "b," and "c" are painted is a roll-up door set in a brick wall. This niche is reminiscent of the memorial altars created in many Latino homes. Also, intentionally or not, when the roll-up door is opened, elements "a" through "c" disappear, but element "d" which includes the name of the deceased remains visible at all times.

INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

Figure 6, the final example from East Los Angeles, shows another example of an Indiana Street placa. The central element "a" reads "Varrio Indiana Dukes are down." "Dukes" is another name that Indiana Street members use to refer to themselves. "To be

down," signified by the down-pointing arrow, can be roughly translated as "to be ready for anything", or "to absolutely support." The message then claims that barrio members are absolutely committed to the barrio, and ready to do whatever is necessary to defend it. It asserts group solidarity and "a commitment to the welfare and defense of the community" (Moore & Vigil, 1989).

Element "b" asserts gang membership as a way of life. The text "Duke Life" is accompanied by the three dots that are commonly seen as a Chicano gang tattoo. This tattoo is traditionally worn on the web between the thumb and first finger (Vigil, 1990) and symbolizes gang involvement for life. This element therefore asserts a commitment to the group as identity and as a way of life. The writer of this graffito, "El Shy One Cisko" in element "c", demonstrates his commitment and solidarity with the group by "throwing down" this placa.

Taken together, these elements declare identity, commitment and solidarity with the barrio. Note the location on the side of a business. The graffito competes with advertising murals. Rojas (1999) describes this phenomenon of "no blank walls" as definitional, in part, of the aesthetic of public space in East Los Angeles which creates "a new reality of visual stimulation" (p. 135) expressing a variety of cultural values.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 displays a summary of the thematic roles, some exemplar text, related signs and dominant signs from the analysis above. As shown, the objects expressed include identity, solidarity, power, rebelliousness, territoriality, and primacy. The objects expressed can be regarded as statements of shared values of the group. These values align with the Moore and Vigil assertion that the gang functions as part of "normal

adolescent concerns" (1989, p. 28). Gang members and affiliated non-members can receive "peer respect and approval, security and protection, group support and acceptance," while expressing "age and sex role identification" in an environment that rebels against white, mainstream institutions.

South Central Thirty-Sixth Street

The next set of graffiti are all taken from the South Central area of Los Angeles and reflect the work of members of the Thirty-Sixth Street gang. The set includes three images of placas without roll call.

INSERT FIGURES 7, 8 & 9 ABOUT HERE

These samples conform to the cholo conventions in that they are large placas written in one dark color on light backgrounds, they include the street name, and they include the names of the writers.

However, these samples vary in three interesting ways: 1) Figure 7 appropriates the "crossing out" practice associated with the predominantly black Crips and Bloods; 2) Figure 8 uses a script common in non-monumental cholo *arte*; and 3) young women, as identified by the use of the Spanish article "*la*", are the apparent writers of these graffiti, contrary to convention.

Tradition is transformed in these samples. One reason for this transformation may be connected to the gang's location in South Central Los Angeles. Though a mere ten-minute drive from East Los Angeles, many neighborhoods fall in between these two regions. For young people who identify strongly with their own barrio, five neighborhoods may represent a world of difference. This distance may loosen the strong

connection to tradition felt in East Los Angeles where multiple generations of gang members have lived in same place for fifty years.

The loosening of this connection may admit more creativity with respect to forms, and may also allow the transgression of traditional sex-roles. South Central is a historically African-American region of the city. In recent years, the numbers of Latinos living there has increased dramatically. Blacks and Latinos live, if not side-by-side, at least neighborhood-by-neighborhood. The crossing out of the letter "C" in Figure 7 is typical of the practice by the largely African-American Bloods of crossing out the initial letter of the opposing gang, the Crips (Moje, 1998, October). The proximity of a different culture allows a cross-pollination of forms not possible in mono-ethnic East Los Angeles.

Also, these women writers have transformed a script commonly associated with femininity. This script, often employed in tattoos and romantic pencil and paper drawings for, by, or about young cholas (Figure 10), is here utilized in the monumental form, redefining both script and form in the process. Young women here are writers, as opposed to East Los Angeles where males virtually always play that role. Note also that while the use of an article before the name is used to mark the (male) writer in the traditional form, here is used to mark gender, as all of the names are preceded by the feminine article "la." These women writers have appropriated a male form by executing it in a "female" script and by marking their gender.

INSERT FIGURE 10 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

Los Angeles cholo graffiti is one of multiple and complex public expressions, including, for example, speech, body discourse, and musical taste, of the Discourse (Gee, 1996) of Chicano gang youth. This public literacy practice is available to these youth by virtue of their race and ethnicity, their immigration status, their sex, age, and socioeconomic class at a particular time and in a particular place. The examples analyzed above demonstrate that the youth who executed them have acquired a structured and rule-governed practice, which they can use purposefully toward signification that is meaningful to both the individual and the group. The examples from South Central Los Angeles also demonstrate that this practice is flexible and can be reshaped by different users in different contexts. I will now use these analyses to describe the content, nature and function of Chicano gang graffiti.

Content

All of the examples analyzed are declarations of identity and affiliation. These declarations of identity include individual pseudonyms (Flako, El Manboy, La Funny) and group names (Indiana Street, White Fence), as well as descriptions of them as powerful, loyal, rebellious and connected to place. The pseudonyms may identify personal qualities and affirm uniqueness while at the same time conferring anonymity (Vigil, 1990). They also bestow familial status on their bearers (Cruz Reguillo, 1991), and as in a family, members of the gang-family memorialize those they have lost.

Peter Quezada is a self-taught artist who has painted many murals in East Los Angeles (Kim, 1995). Quezada often involves local gang youth in the creation of murals, and always includes a "roll call" of the collaborating artists. Because he has worked to counsel youth against gang involvement, he insists that they use their given names, not

their gang names, on the roll call. The only exception he makes to this rule is "when he is commemorating those who have died" (p. 17).

The barrio names, which frequently do not align with political or bureaucratic boundaries, affirm local meanings and connect the gang members to a specific place and its history. Kim (1995) notes that urban geography is mapped according to subjective meanings. According to her, the City of Los Angeles identified 53 different "centers" and erected 433 signs to designate neighborhoods, while a major local map company named 70 different communities in the city (p. 22). In East Los Angeles, barrio boundaries and names have remained relatively stable for over twenty years.

The claims about barrio life are tied to power and bravado (rifa), rebellion and defiance (13, Duke Life). These claims are similar across neighborhoods and through time. Connections, both implicit and explicit, are made as well to larger social units (the Mexican Mafia, the city of Los Angeles, the family, and the church). These connections occur at various levels and to social units of varying proximity.

Nature

Declarations of identity and affiliation are always cultural. The cultural content of the examples above represent a hybridization of forms from several cultures, including Old School Cholo culture, Chicanismo, the earlier Pachuquismo or Zootsuiter culture, and to Mexico by way of the Mexican-American migration.

These cultural artifacts are monumental, in the sense that they are prominent and over-sized, and public in that they are accessible to a large, unspecified group. The prominence and publicity are achieved through the use of high-contrast, single color spray painted letters and symbols on highly visible neighborhood walls.

The graffiti is executed by conforming to, and, in differing contexts, experimenting with a system of forms with a common lexicon. That lexicon is based in Spanish and English orthography, Arabic and Roman numerals, and various other signs (such as the three-dots and down-pointing arrow in Figure 6, and the Dodgers logo in Figure 5) drawn from local and popular sources. This East Los Angeles lexicon has remained fairly stable across time (Romotsky & Romotsky, 1976). The historical stability of language, forms, locations, media, and process lead to a conservative characterization of this literacy practice.

The conventional practice is a gendered one, with young men being the typical writers. This gendering offers evidence of the subordination of women (Stromquist, 1997). The sexual division of labor, which assigns domestic responsibilities inordinately to young women, and the control of women's sexuality by men, which leads to strict constraint of their public movements (1997, p. 52) will typically keep young women in their homes at night when most graffiti is executed. As such, the women who position themselves as writers in this sample can be seen as resisting the traditional gender regime of their families and neighborhoods.

This resistance on the part of young women, as well as the appropriation of forms more typically associated with black gangs and the monumentalizing of pen and ink forms, demonstrate that while this literacy practice tends to be conservative within East Los Angeles, it is an adaptable practice. This adaptation exhibits hybridity and flexibility in the hands of different writers or the context of a new geographical setting.

The fact that graffiti is a crime makes it by definition an oppositional practice. But oppositional to whom? The memorial graffito (figure 6) may indeed align with

values promulgated through the family and the church. And while community efforts to eradicate graffiti do exist within barrios, not all community members are in agreement with this approach (Kim, 1995). The content of graffiti, indeed, is generally positive as it serves normal adolescent needs. Stewart (1988) describes graffiti writers as rebelling "against the imposed environment", where there is nowhere to make "his or her 'mark'" (p. 171). The crime, she asserts, is not in the content, but in the mode of production.

The criminal aspect of graffiti is the not the medium utilized, even though law enforcement efforts have sought to control access to spray paint in order to control graffiti, but rather the writers' unauthorized seizure of (private) public space. The walls upon which graffiti appears (and which constitute buildings that are owned) as seen to be violated and polluted by the presence of this writing. Outrage and fear are common middle-class reactions to the appearance of graffiti (Stewart, 1988). Graffiti is said to provide evidence of the existence of gangs and their threat—but certainly other proof exists, and we know that the elimination of graffiti does not lead to the elimination of gangs. Instead, painting over graffiti serves to provide fresh canvases to waiting writers.

The criminality of gang graffiti, and the fact that it is most frequently written by low-income youth, has helped to shape its practice. The writing must be completed quickly, anonymously and with low-cost materials. Further, the legal constraints to writing graffiti help to make the completion of a large and visible placa more of an accomplishment than it might otherwise represent. The achievement represents not just a declaration in support of the barrio, but also "getting away with" a peer-valued act in the face of considerable barriers established by authorities.

That Chicano gang graffiti is a relatively "close code," that is it requires additional information in order to translate it into Standard English, means that readers are sorted along a continuum of "insider" to "outsider." The more of an insider the reader is, the more easily she or he will be able to understand the intended message. Members of the same gang, for example, can decode the message and may know the "real identities" of the persons referred to by pseudonyms. Those in another gang may be able to decode the message, but be unsure of the identities of the persons behind the pseudonyms. Accordingly, local residents may be familiar with some or all of the code, so their readings may reside between insider and outsider. Orellana and Hernández (1999) describe how first-graders in their study "paid close attention" to graffiti and "deciphered it more readily" (p. 616) than did the researchers. It is common for even now middle-class adults from East Los Angeles to refer to their neighborhoods by the barrio names used in gang graffiti rather than official designations. This sorting of readers performed by gang graffiti means that graffiti function differently for different groups of readers.

Function

Chicano gang graffiti function differently for different audiences, which is to say that different publics construct differing meanings. Here, I consider three of those possible functions. For the writers and other youth in the gang, graffiti may fulfill normal developmental needs. Though it is a forbidden practice within school, for educators graffiti may display literate competency and raise interesting questions regarding pedagogy. And for the larger society, graffiti is embedded with important critiques of modern urban life.

In their examination of urban youth programs Heath and McLaughlin (1993) found two key features that were common to effective programs. The first feature, in common with the findings for gangs in this paper, was that the programs provided opportunities for young people to identify and affiliate with the group. The second, crucially missing from typical gang activity, was that they provided opportunities for group achievement, in the company of caring and demanding adults, usually through some sort of public performance.

Vigil (1999) highlights the need for adolescents to engage in ego construction. He notes that the youth who become involved in Chicano gangs tend to display a vulnerability, or "fragmented ego" that the social structure of the gang can exploit to reorient those youth toward the values and beliefs of the gang. While the enactment is often maladaptive, the need is common among adolescents.

A possible function of the gang member's pseudonym in this regard is offered by Berlant (1993) in her socio-historical analysis of the public and private identities of "historically overembodied" (p. 201) persons. By overembodied, Berlant means those who do not conform to the tacit American "standard of white male embodiment" (p. 176), in other words, women and racialized minorities. Overembodiment is "in itself a sign of inadequacy to proper citizenship" (p. 178) and denies a legitimate space for participation in public life. Overembodied individuals must therefore suppress their own bodies and perform or imitate authorized forms through the public presentation of a "prosthetic" self (p. 199) if they wish to participate in public discourse. The prosthetic self performed by Chicano gang youth, and signified in the pseudonym, presents a powerful, confident,

invulnerable member of an influential fraternity, which perhaps functions to disguise a more fragmented material experience.

The reinscription of barrio names within neighborhoods over time serves to create and re-create an unauthorized definition of place. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1996) describes how "cognitive maps" are ritually enacted in New York neighborhoods by various community parades (p. 406). These maps counter official renderings of the city and constitute "a map of social relations and power structures shaping life in the area and beyond" (p. 407). Similarly, while the mode of production is subject to community contestation (though not unilateral delegitimation), Chicano gang youth are involved in the production of space imbued with local and historical meaning.

For educators, gang graffiti may function as a display of literate competence. Contrary to stereotype, as mentioned earlier, Romo and Falbo (1996) found no correlation between high school drop out and gang membership. However they did find that youth involved with gangs were indifferent to school work and were tracked into low-level programs (p. 85), two findings that may be related. Thus, it might be inferred that gang members possess below average literacy skills. They may in fact perform at lower than average levels on standardized tests of decontextualized "autonomous literacy" practices, but this analysis of gang graffiti demonstrates the writers' control of genre, forms, symbols, and audience in purposeful signification. The writers have acquired a systematic literacy practice and employ it appropriately as defined by that system.

Perhaps more importantly though, the widespread, systematic and stable employment of this literacy practice implies a highly successful pedagogy at work. That

generations of gang-involved youth have acquired this practice testifies to its success. Other research (Moje, 1998, October) and anecdotal evidence (Bojorquez, 1997) suggest that writers learn this practice through an apprenticeship model. Young writers begin by copying the forms and styles of monumental graffiti in pen or pencil on notebook paper or personal objects (Moje, 1998, October). Older writers occupy positions of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991), wherein they participate in the actual practice, but in a limited way (p. 14) by, for example, stealing the required spray paint, or acting as a lookout (Bojorquez, 1997).

However, I would like to suggest that the method employed in this pedagogy is less important than the motivation it engenders. Recall Gee's (Gee, 1990) notion of Discourses as identity kits. I propose that the Discourse offered by the Chicano gang is more attractive to some youth than that offered by the school. The success of this pedagogy lies in its success in recruiting adolescent motivation to "be one of us." And the failure of schools vis-à-vis this population lies in part in the failure to offer an appealing alternative Discourse.

Public literacy practices are always political because they occur in a contested sphere. The inscription of gang-related symbols is not only illegal in public spaces, but also at the school site. Further, most schools proscribe their inscription even on articles owned by the students. It is useful then to ask, whose interests are served by the proscription of this literacy practice? The proscription is based, again, not on the content, but on the surface features of gang graffiti. Thus, school and law enforcement officials need not attend to the content because the form is illegitimate. This delegitimation means

that any useful information or critique that might be found in graffiti is dismissed out of hand.

When the content of graffiti is not dismissed, a larger audience can discern two possible critiques in the practice of Chicano gang graffiti. I do not claim that these critiques are necessarily intentional on the part of the writers (though they may be), but rather that because of the nature and content of the literacy practice, the critique is embedded within it.

Wertsch (Wertsch, 1998) draws on Bakhtin's (Bakhtin, 1984) notion of "hidden dialogicality" in his analysis of unofficial Estonian histories. I propose that Chicano gang graffiti can be read in a similar way. In describing hidden dialogicality, Bakhtin asks the reader to imagine a dialogue in which one person is "present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker" (p. 197). The visible speaker is the less powerful in the dyad. This speaker must resort to using an "alternative textual space" because the authorized one does not allow a critique to be formed against it. In Wertsch's example, he shows that the unofficial histories are "organized around counterclaims" (p. 162) to the official Soviet History of Estonia, which accounts for both their variability and their general lack of coherence. As Gundaker (1998) notes regarding coherence, "when people seem inarticulate it is more than likely powerlessness, not naivete, renders them so" (p. 6). In this light, Chicano gang graffiti, with its insistent declarations of identity and affiliation for example, posits an authorized discourse, that of the invisible speaker, that denies the existence of Chicano gang youth and fragments their alliance.

This perspective allows for the discernment of two critiques implied in Chicano gang graffiti. First, the fact that writers usurp (private) public space highlights the absence of free public space, especially in low-income neighborhoods. Even if graffiti writers were to change to a "legitimate" mode of production, public spaces for the enactment of important developmental processes are scarce. The tools necessary for that enactment may be expensive.

Where middle-class youth may meet these developmental needs through music lessons, working with clay, acting classes, poetry readings, soccer leagues, and the like, extracurricular activities such as these exist in only limited ways for residents of low-income neighborhoods. Both local governments and schools rely on limited funding, circumstances which encourage a "back-to-basics" approach and the cutting of arts and recreational programs. Moreover, a muted racism may be at work in urban schools where children of color are denied opportunities to assemble publicly because "they don't know how to act", or for fear of disruption (Fine, 1991).

The existence of a proscribed public literacy practice begs a comparison to authorized public literacy practices. Here too, a critique can be discriminated because authorized practices, such as billboards and commercial signs, are explicitly and nearly exclusively commercial in nature. By contrast, graffiti declares, "there is no sponsor here, there is nothing for sale." Elsewhere (Aguilar, 1999a), I have argued that a similar dynamic exists among Lowriders, another Chicano subculture. This rejection of the consumerist values espoused in dominant culture by poor and working class youth can be seen as an empowering form of resistance.

The second critique is an extension of the first, and asserts the paucity of opportunities for urban youth to publicly display their identity and affiliation through group achievement. While there are always innovative community programs, they are typically run by dedicated adults on shoestring budgets and so are constantly in danger of disappearing (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). Most schools in California eliminated any broad implementation of music and arts programs long ago, and sports programs also suffer from inadequate budgets. When school and community opportunities are few and far between, and families are absent or weak in their ability to shape prosocial behavior, children do not possess many other options besides the gang.

Conclusion

Educational Implications

One conclusion that educators can draw from this analysis is that the assessment of reading and writing ability is context-dependent. Literate persons will display competency within the literacy to which they have been apprenticed, and conversely, they will not display competency in a literacy to which they have not been apprenticed. Several investigators (Gee, 1996; Gutierrez, 1995; Wertsch, 1998) have detailed how schools often fail to apprentice nonmainstream youth into official literacy, teaching "about" rather than supporting students in the acquisition of valued literacy outcomes (Gutierrez, 1995). Even when students are exposed to official literacy, it is often, especially for struggling readers and writers, in the context of remedial courses where poor quality forms are transmitted. And while it has been argued that nonmainstream literacies, such as Chicano gang graffiti, further marginalize their practitioners (Moje,

1998, October), the often low quality literacy that is offered to urban youth has the same effect (Fine, 1991).

Piaget (1962) observed that often schools do not take advantage of children's "spontaneous concepts" (p. 9), instead expecting them to engage in practices they have already acquired or practices that they are not quite ready for yet. Although the demonstration of literate competence evinced by youth who practice gang graffiti is valuable information for educators regarding the potential ability of these young people, schools cannot merely exploit this competence in the school context. Adolescents must have access to ways to acquire valued literacies. This acquisition implies apprenticeship into a new Discourse. However, if that Discourse devalues or dismisses the social and individual identities of nonmainstream youth, those youth may withdraw or resist, both mentally and physically. Given the historical context of racial prejudice and discrimination in the U.S., schools cannot simply offer a "neutral" approach to literacy because the implicit ideology of "autonomous literacy" (Street, 1995) rejects those youth.

What is needed is a new school context within which to acquire literacy. This context would publicly recognize the importance of identity and affiliation for young people, and offer multidisciplinary opportunities for display of accomplishment. It would be actively and explicitly democratic, acknowledging that truly democratic spheres cannot achieve consensus, but are characterized by multiple and contesting voices (Fraser, 1993). It would acknowledge that free dialogue may be challenging, offensive and even dangerous (Brill, 1989), but would inculcate the skills necessary to create sufficient safety, respect and understanding. Schools would ensure the physical safety of

all, but reorient toward the accommodation of polyphony. In this new school context, all young people would be welcome and no Discourse would be criminalized.

Possible ways to approach this challenge can be seen, for example, in Peter Quezada's work (Kim, 1995). He considers his murals to be "graffiti-deterrent" precisely because he appropriates styles and symbols that gang youth find appealing. He asserts anti-gang and anti-drug messages by using this vernacular, while he involves "at-risk" youth in their production. Romo & Falbo (1996) also document a variety of approaches to working with gang-involved youth within the school context (p. 86). They report that a few schools took a positive approach to these youth by making efforts to involve them in school activities, and by making resources, such as conflict resolution training, available to them.

Contrary to common belief, Romo and Falbo (1996) found that "gang involvement was often instigated by academic failure" (p. 88), rather than the reverse, and that when gang-involved youth were expelled from school, the expulsion intensified, rather than reduced, criminal behavior by those youth. These findings imply that gang youth need to stay connected to the school and be supported toward success if they are to establish life choice options outside of the gang. Family involvement, according to Romo and Falbo, is a key issue there, but the families of the children in their study were sometimes unable to participate in this process, or uncertain as to how to proceed (p. 88). Schools should help to fill that gap.

A new school context would be connected beyond the walls of the school. When urban schools behave as islands, neither students, nor teachers, nor families profit. Indeed, in creating new contexts for learning, schools can learn from the heterogeneous,

multivocal nature of the public spaces that surround them, and the ways that community members negotiate contestation, as in East Los Angeles. Schools that knit alliances with families, community organizations, churches, and local business and political leaders gain in understanding and support, and increase their chances of integrating disenfranchised youth into sustaining networks.

Questions for Further Research

Investigations into the literacy practices of various nonmainstream groups may provide further insights about those group members and their critiques of school literacy, massification, and commodification. Such investigations would benefit from the use of a variety of methods, especially interviews with and observations of practitioners. The perspectives of other involved actors, such as teachers, counselors and parents would also usefully inform this research. Finally, the conduct of research at a variety of sites, including effective youth programs, homes, and recreational venues, could provide important contextual information.

Data thus collected should be analyzed for what it explains about literacies explicitly, but could also be analyzed for ways that features related to the gender, race and class identities of youth are constructed, and for what the consequences of these constructions are. These analyses might help researchers further understand ways in which nonmainstream youth internalize, reshape and resist constructions of identity implicit in literacy practices.

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[1] Journalist Ruben Salazar defined *Chicano* as "a Mexican-American who does not have an Anglo image of himself" (Cockcroft & Barnet-Sánchez, 1990) (p. 9). Many people restrict usage of the term to a specific political allegiance associated with the Civil Rights Movement, while others use it more broadly to mean Mexican-Americans. In its broadest definition, *Chicano* means a person of Mexican ethnicity. *Latino* refers to anyone of Latin American origin, and so is the most inclusive (and least specific) descriptor.

[2] *Cholo* is commonly used in East Los Angeles to refer to gang members (*chola* is the feminine version), and derives from the reference to "Latin American Indians who are partially acculturated to Hispanic-based elite cultures" (Vigil, 1990) (p. 3).

[3] Bojorquez's famous graffito, *Señor Suerte* (Mr. Luck) is shown in Appendix B. He writes, "to the Latino people, a skull's representation is not about death, but about rebirth.... My Skull is the gangster image of protection from death."

[4]Sleepy Lagoon URL, <http://www.sleepylagoon.com>

[5] The fact that these data were downloaded from an internet site would constitute an interesting inquiry itself. Increasingly, Chicano subcultures, such as those interested in graffiti, lowriding, Chicano history, and organizing for social action, are participating in "cyber discourses."

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Table 1. Display of dominant themes and signs.

THEMATIC ROLE	FIGURES	RELATED SIGNS	DOMINANT SIGNS
Declare group	*WHITE FENCE* *INDIANA ST* *ID* .: *(Gang pseudonyms)*	Identity Group identity Familial attachment	Identity
Declare lifestyle	*DUKE LIFE* *13* .: *FLAKO RIP*	Similarity Group commitment Belonging Honor Solidarity	Solidarity
Strong	*WHITE FENCE RIFA*	Potency Courage Vigor Power	Power
Rebellious	*13* *X3*	Drug use, violence Anti-authority Rebelliousness	Rebelliousness
Declare territory	*VARRIO INDIANA ST*	Rootedness Territoriality	Territoriality
First	*WF 1939* *1st*	Originality Primacy	Primacy

Figure 1. "Wild Style" Graffito—"Pistol"

Figure 2. Los Angeles Cholo Style Graffito—"White Fence"

Figure 3. Typical Roll Call Placa—"White Fence"

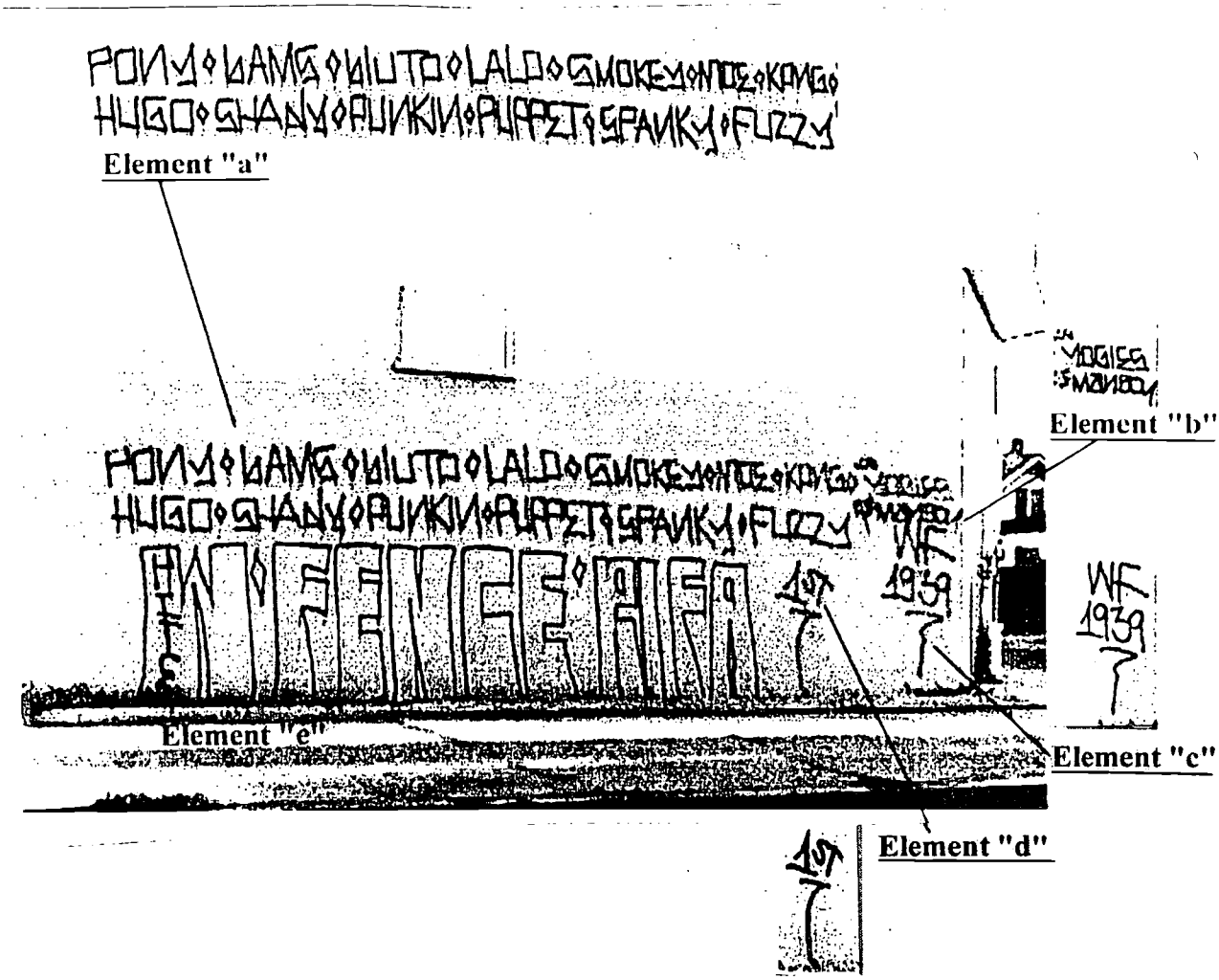

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Figure 4. Placa Without Roll Call—"Indiana Street"

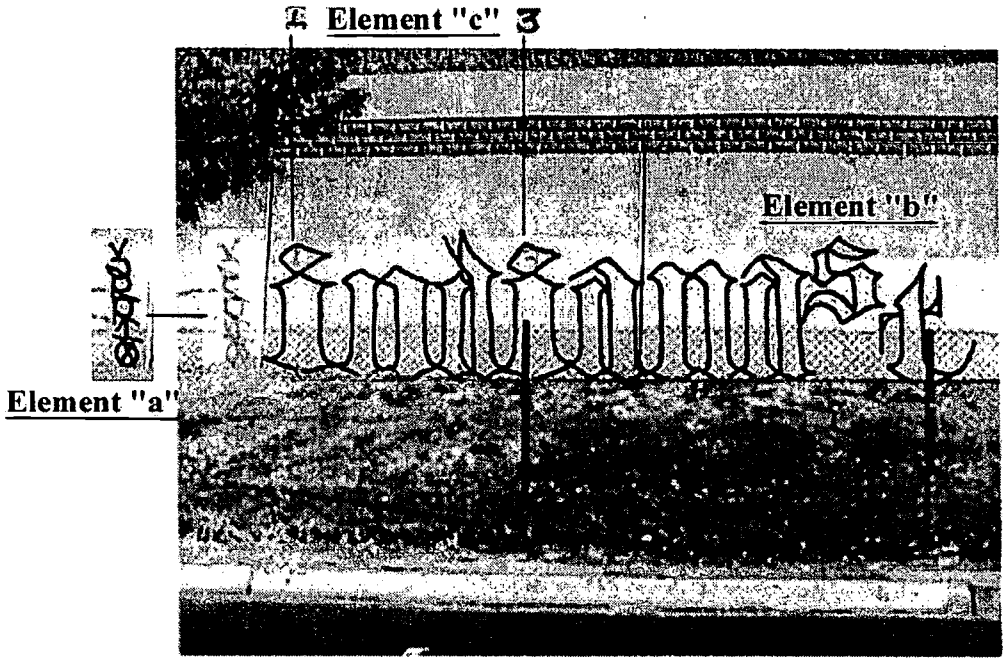

Figure 5. Memorial Graffito—"Indiana Street"

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Figure 6. Duke Life Placa—"Indiana Street"

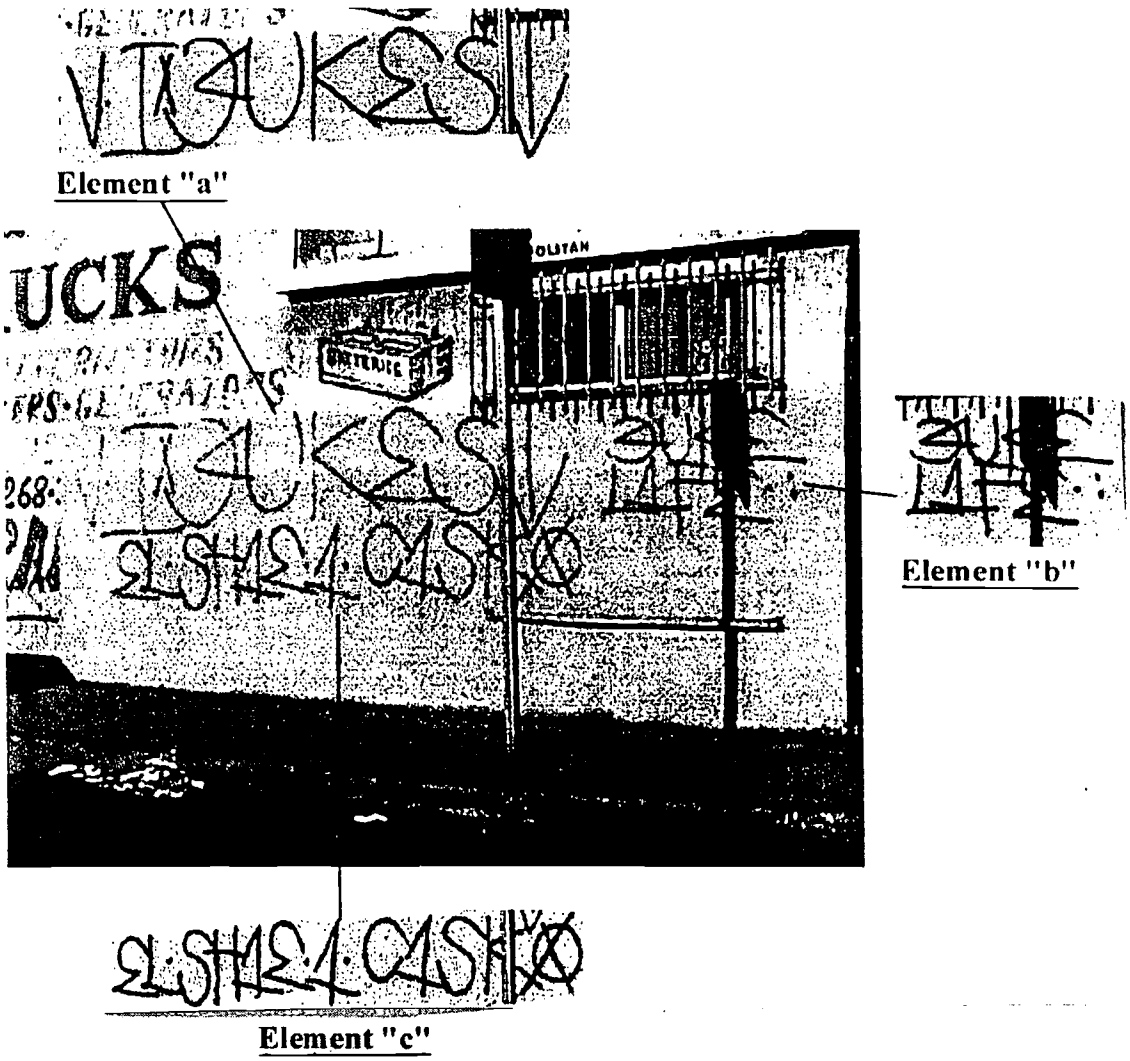

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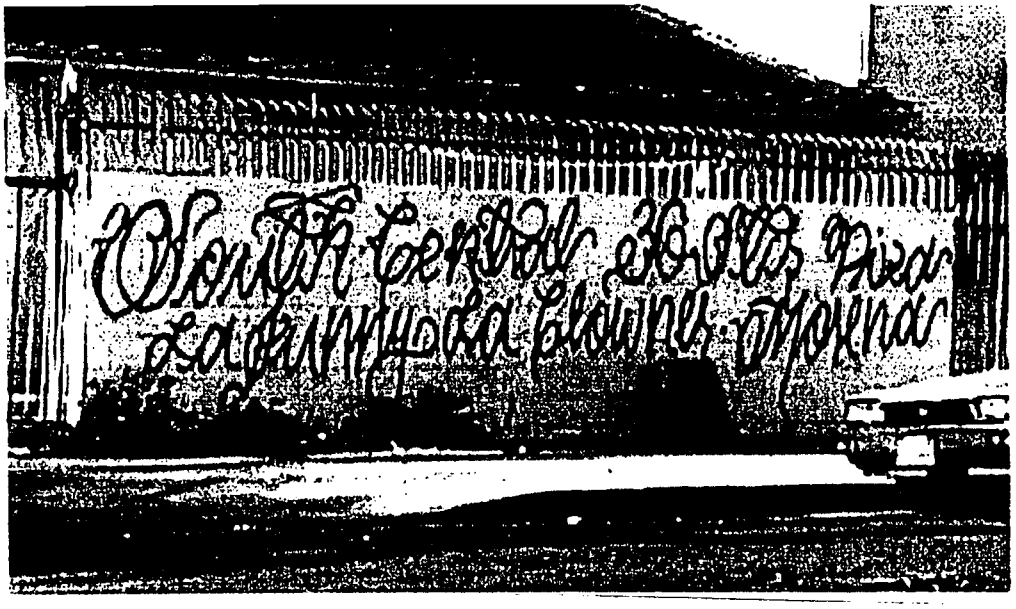
Figure 7. South Central 36th Street with Cross Out

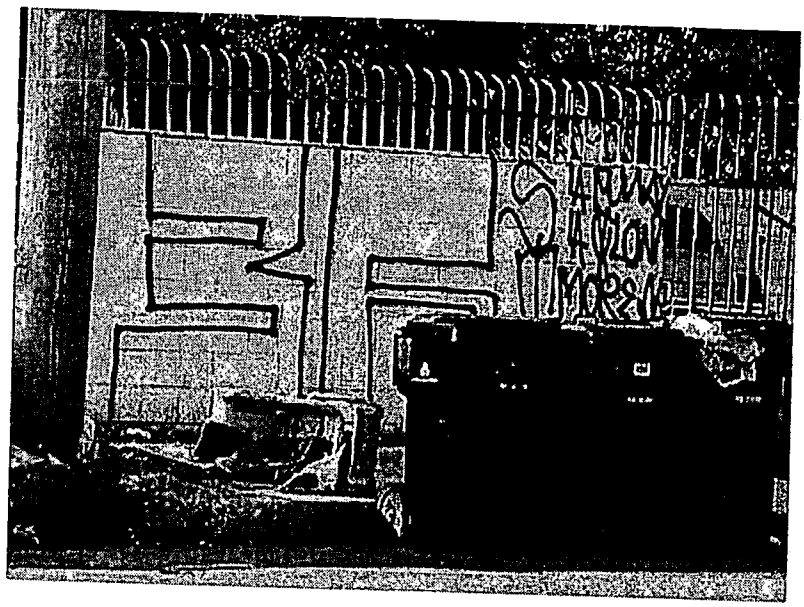
SC TRES SEIS STR **LA FUNNY** **LA HAPPY**
LA CLOWN **MORENA**

Figure 8. South Central 36th Street in "Feminine" Script



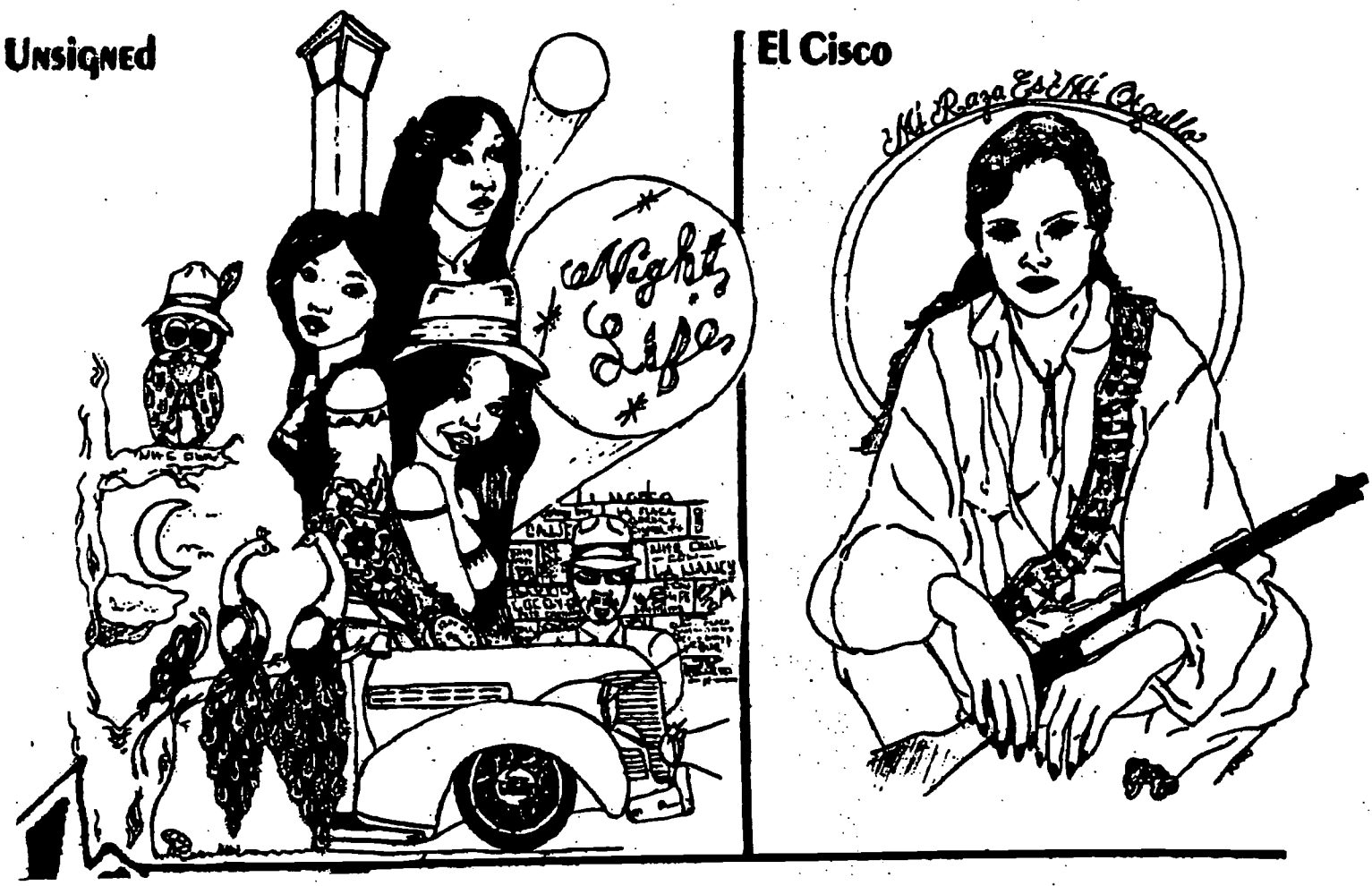
South Central 36 Str Prieta
La Funny La Clowner Morena

Figure 9. South Central 36th Street



36 S LA FUNNY
T LA CLOWN
MORENA

Figure 10. Example of "Feminine" Script from Arte del Varrio



APPENDIX A- Chaz Bojorquez's Señor Suerte

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